

## ***The Da Vinci Code: History or Fiction?***

By Lee Strobel and Garry Poole

Breathtaking Lincoln Cathedral, towering atop Lindum Hill in a quaint community two hours by train north of London, can be seen from twenty miles away. Some say it's among the finest medieval buildings in all of Europe. Its edifice, parts of which date back to 1072, is awash in spotlights at night, creating a spectacular golden glow.

I pulled open the massive black door and walked inside. The cavernous sanctuary, with its arched ceilings and elegant stained glass, still functions as a church today. Exploring a long hallway, our footsteps echoing as we went, Garry and I came upon a small room to the right and opened the door, which creaked eerily on its hinges. Our eyes immediately were captured by an elegant statue along the wall — a finely carved marble image of a winged and bearded figure bearing a written proclamation. How ancient was it? Fifteenth century? Earlier?

I smiled and picked it up, easily holding it above my head. "Look!" I exclaimed. "Styrofoam!" Sure enough, the statue was a clever fake.

Next to it was a monument that purported to date back centuries — but it was made of plywood. And the stone wall with beautiful frescos painted on it? The whole thing was drawn on heavy canvas — including the stones themselves.

Ron Howard had been here.

As director of *The Da Vinci Code* movie, he had been faced with a challenge. The plot of the book climaxes with a confrontation at London's Westminster Abbey, but officials there refused to let Howard film his movie inside their historic walls. The reason, they said, is that the novel is filled with "factual errors" and was "theologically unsound."

So Howard went hunting for another ancient building that could pass for the interior of the 940-year-old Abbey. That brought him to Lincoln Cathedral.

Cathedral officials were critical of Brown's book too, calling it "speculative and far-fetched," and even heretical in places, "based on

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ideas put forward rather late in the church's history." Still, they opted to open their doors for the filming of three of the movie's scenes. "The book claims that the church has suppressed important facts about Jesus," the Cathedral's dean said in a statement. "The way to counter this accusation is to be open about the facts as we understand them and welcome vigorous debate."

Once inside, Hollywood did what it does best: create illusions. Phony paintings, crypts, and statues were skillfully designed and constructed. To the casual observer, they appeared every bit as real as the other historic artifacts in the medieval cathedral. On camera, they would undoubtedly fool viewers.

In a way, this harmless Hollywood trickery is a metaphor for the more insidious illusions that, according to Dan Brown, have fooled students of history for generations. His basic charge in *The Da Vinci Code* is that people have been misled and deceived by historical accounts about Jesus that have no basis in reality. History, Brown asserts, is written by the winners, who naturally paint themselves in positive ways while disparaging their defeated foes — and so we're left with a biased and tainted record that only tells one side of the story.

"Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ," says a character in the novel, "is *false*."

What *can* we know for sure about history? How can we assess whether an ancient document is trustworthy? Are there legitimate criteria we can use to test historical claims? And what about some of the eye-popping historical allegations that Brown makes, such as his assertion that the Priory of Sion has been protecting the secrets about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and their descendants for centuries? Or that it was Emperor Constantine, an ersatz Christian, who deified Jesus, collated the Bible, and destroyed competing gospels in order to eliminate the real story about Jesus' identity?

I placed a call to Dr. Paul Maier, a well-respected and straight-shooting professor of ancient history, and made an appointment to question him about these issues. It was time to get some answers.

Dr. Maier, a wiry and feisty professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University, has achieved acclaim as a scholar, teacher, and

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author of both academic and popular writings. Since earning his doctorate at the University of Basel in Switzerland in 1957, he has become a recognized expert on ancient Near East history, ancient Greek and Roman history, and Christianity and the Roman Empire. He has written more than 250 articles and reviews for professional journals, including the *Harvard Theological Review*. His teaching awards include Professor of the Year from the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education.

Maier has written such books as *In the Fullness of Time*, which examines secular evidence about Jesus and early Christianity; a new translation and commentary on the first-century historian Josephus; and a similar book on Eusebius, the first church historian. He's also the author of historical novels, including *Pontius Pilate* and *The Flames of Rome*. His thriller *A Skeleton in God's Closet* became the top national bestseller in religious fiction and led to a sequel, *More Than a Skeleton*.

Maier has more than just a passing interest in *The Da Vinci Code*. Together with Hank Hanegraaff, host of the popular national radio program *The Bible Answer Man*, he conducted an in-depth analysis of Brown's novel. From that research, he and Hanegraaff wrote *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?*, which provides answers to historical issues raised by the book.

When we rendezvoused in California, sitting across from each other in a borrowed room, I opened my copy of *The Da Vinci Code* and read aloud this quote: "History is always written by the winners. When two cultures clash, the loser is obliterated and the winner writes the history books — books which glorify their own cause and disparage the conquered foe."

I looked up at Maier. "Do you agree with that?" I asked. "Is history always written by the winners?"

Maier didn't hesitate. "No, the whole premise is false," he declared. "I can give you some interesting instances where history was written by the losers. For example, one of the greatest civil wars in the ancient world was the famous Peloponnesian War. [Its history] was written by Thucydides, who was an Athenian, and the Athenians lost the war.

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Sparta won. And yet, Thucydides wrote a very objective treatment of what happened in the Peloponnesian War."

With that quick refutation of one of Brown's major premises, our conversation continued to unfold:

***Q: What determines whether a historical event actually occurred? How do you know, as a historian, that any event in ancient history really took place?***

**Maier:** There are various methods. First of all, "multiple attestations," or different authors writing about the same event, is one criteria for authenticity. For example, we have three different versions of the great fire of Rome in 64 AD. Basically, all three of them attest that Rome was totally destroyed, or at least that Rome was only partially destroyed, so this does not deny that the great fire of Rome actually happened. We know it did happen.

***Q: So there might be some differences in secondary details, but the core is trustworthy because you have multiple reports on the same event?***

**Maier:** Exactly. Another interesting criterion is the "criterion of embarrassment." In other words, very often we can bring more truth out of a hostile source than a friendly one. A friendly source can beef up or exaggerate its particular role, but when a hostile source concedes something because everybody knows it really occurred, then the ancient historian concludes that's the truth.

There are other methods of determining the truth behind historical events as well. Archaeologists give us hard evidence that sheds light on a particular source, like geographical data and background. If the setting of the event is accurate and one can go see it today, we know it's true. Flavius Josephus, the famous first-century Jewish historian, talks about the siege of Masada. Well, you can go to Masada today and see the very snake path that he talked about two thousand years ago on the east side of that great crag. This confirms that Josephus was not just making this up.

***Q: But as a Christian, doesn't that bias your view of history?***

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**Maier:** I try the best I possibly can to be objective in historical research. I think every true historian is digging for the truth. In the case of archaeology or ancient historical research, we look for the truth and let the chips fall where they may. And what is so incredibly interesting about the chips in the case of Christianity is how they fall on the side of supporting the biblical record.

**Q: What about the bias of the person in ancient history who is doing the reporting? You mentioned that Josephus was a Jewish historian of the first century. He certainly had his biases. How do you sort through that as a historian?**

**Maier:** You've got to learn to put on filters. For example, we know that Josephus in the *War of the Jews* was very partisan to the Roman side and he tries to favor his own benefactors in Rome. So we must neutralize that somewhat in reverse against his admiration for things Roman. Now, later on, he's a little more honest when he does the *Antiquities*. And so, you always try to check out the source's bias, and then put a reverse negative filter on that to get at the truth.

Maier's basic point — that historians use sensible and proven approaches to figure out what really happened in ancient times — did make sense to me. I was particularly fascinated by his comment about how these approaches tend to support the biblical record — but I knew I'd be delving deeper into this topic in future interviews. In the meantime, I turned our conversation to a historical claim by Brown that a clandestine organization called the Priory of Sion has spent centuries guarding the secret about the descendants of Jesus. I was curious about how well this assertion would withstand a historian's scrutiny.

"The book makes the claim that this information about the Priory is contained in secret documents that were discovered in the National French Library," I said. "Would you not concede that those documents do exist?"

Clearly, I had struck a nerve. "The documents exist — but they're all fraudulent!" Maier exclaimed. "On the first page of *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown lists two items as 'FACT': Opus Dei and the Priory of Sion. Now, this is his method. He will offer a little truth — maybe 15 to 20 percent — and the rest is falsehood. But people will think it's all true

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because they know that part of it is true. The claim in *The Da Vinci Code* is that the Priory of Sion was founded in 1099 AD in Jerusalem. Well, the fact of the matter is that it was founded in 1956, in Paris, by a crook and forger named Pierre Plantard, who planted secret documents in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris."

Maier was gravely offended by the notion. "The central strand in *The Da Vinci Code* is based on fraud," he said. "This is just incredible!"

Indeed, it *was* amazing! "So the documents are real; the problem is that they're phony," I said.

"They're *totally* phony!" he replied. "Exactly!"

Suddenly, it was as if a crucial thread had been pulled out of *The Da Vinci Code* and its central premise began to unravel. So many of its allegations, including the supposed involvement of Leonardo Da Vinci as a Grand Master of the Priory, can be traced back to counterfeit documents that have absolutely no basis in reality. And with the claims about the Priory being so confidently labeled as "fact" by Brown, what repercussions does this have for the overall credibility of his work?

"When you see this as a historian," I asked Maier, "what does that do to you?"

"Well, I worry about the truth. I really do," Maier replied. "What happens if a majority of the readers of this novel will believe all the lies that are included in the second half of the book? Will this become the majority opinion? And will those historians who are really seeking the truth be crowded out in the future?"

"Actually, I am far more furious at *The Da Vinci Code* as a professor of ancient history than I am as a Christian. The church has been attacked for two thousand years now. Well, what's new? But I cannot stand it when universally accepted facts of the past are falsified. This I cannot take."

Then he gave the ultimate insult a college professor can offer. "If a student of mine had written something like this," he declared, "I would flunk him!"

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